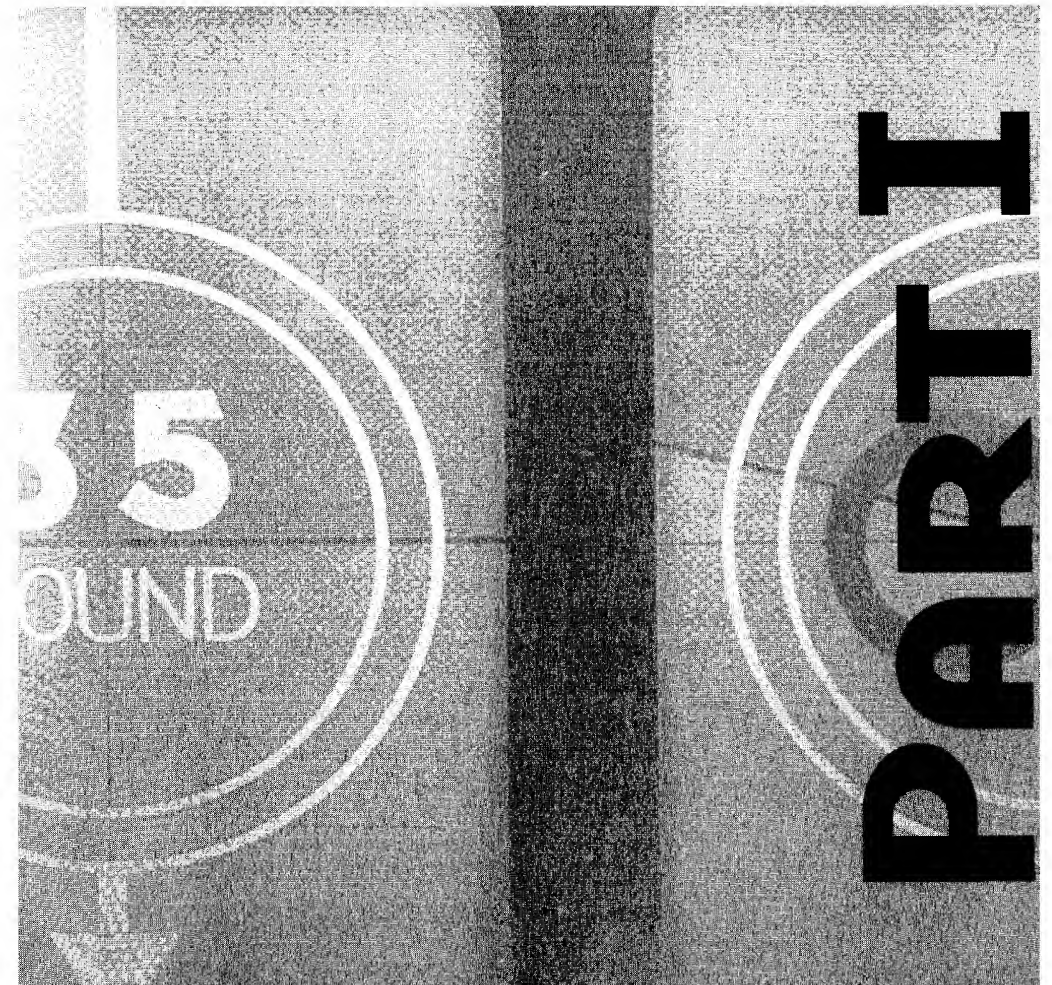


The History of Film Music



CHAPTER 1

Early Films and Music: The Silent Movies

Music in film is a vital necessity, a living force.
—Bernard Herrmann'

Music and drama. Drama and music. Either way, these two branches of the performing arts have been linked together for thousands of years in many cultures around the world. There is Japanese Kibuki, Indian Bharatnatyam, and the Balinese Monkey Dance. The early Greeks and Romans used choruses and orchestras to accompany their dramatic plays. In Europe, during medieval times there were pagan festivals that used music to accompany stories of gods and heroes, as well as liturgical dramas that portrayed various biblical stories through singing and dramatic action. During the Renaissance, music was used in various scenes in the plays of Shakespeare and others. In the Baroque period of classical music we find early opera and ballet, forms of musical drama that continue today. And finally, in this century we have the huge popularity of Broadway plays and film music.

In all these examples, the music and drama can be separated into independent entities, but their combination as a whole is greater than the sum of their individual parts. Overtures and arias from Mozart's or Verdi's operas are often performed independently and are musically satisfying. Some of these same operas exist as plays or books. But hear the aria as part of the staged opera and the effect is profound in a way that the play or music by itself cannot approach. Music for film is similar. Certainly a film composer can write good music that stands up on its own without the film. John Williams' Suite from *E.T.*, *The Extra-*

Terrestrial is frequently performed in concert to great acclaim. But when heard in conjunction with the visual of the film, it is awesome and the whole film takes on another dimension.

It is often difficult for the modern 1990s audience to appreciate the experience of the film audience of even the 1940s or 1950s, much less the audience of the turn of the 20th century, when the technology of moving pictures was new. But try, for a moment, to put yourself in the shoes of the filmgoer in 1895. The common forms of long-distance communication were letters and the telegraph. The cutting edge of communication technology was the telephone, and only a tiny percentage of city dwellers had one in their homes or had ever used one. Horses and trains were still the primary modes of travel; automobiles were about as common as telephones, and the flight of the first airplane was still 10 years away. Electric lights were only 15 years old and gas lamps were still the prevailing method of artificial light. Einstein had yet to propose his Theory of General Relativity. Stravinsky was only 13 years old and Schoenberg's twelve-tone system of music was more than two decades in the future; music lovers were most familiar with Brahms, Wagner, Mozart, Verdi, Beethoven, and other 18th and 19th century composers.

Imagine now that you enter a small theater, or even a café with curtains closed against the light. A very noisy machine in the middle of the room starts up, and across a screen in the front you see the images of people, animals, and buildings. To you, the almost turn-of-the-century filmgoer, this is like a miracle. And yet at the same time the images seem disembodied, for there is no accompanying sound. The mouths might move, the horse might gallop, the car spews its fumes, but there are no words, there is no clippity-clop, and there is no chugging and banging of the engine. All is left to your imagination, for the only sounds you hear are the loud and noisy rotations of the projector's motor.

However, imagine you are in the same room and there is a pianist or small group of musicians playing while the picture moves on the screen. This adds another dimension to your experience, and even if the music is just background music with no dramatic importance, your previous impression of empty, disembodied images is trans-

formed into a more complete experience. There are still no words, no hooves, no automobile engine noises. But the addition of music somehow makes the images on the screen more complete and less like two-dimensional shadows.

From the very beginning, there were probably musical accompaniments to films, though the first documented incidents were in 1895 and 1896 when the Lumière family screened some of its early films in Paris and London with musical accompaniment. These were a great success, and soon orchestras were accompanying films in the theaters.

At first, the music that went with these films was taken from anywhere: classical favorites, popular songs, folk songs, or café music. There was little or no attempt to give the music a dramatic importance; it was there to enliven the audience's experience.

As the film industry grew and became more sophisticated, music in the theaters grew as well. Depending on the size and location of the theater, there could be anywhere from one piano or organ to a small orchestra. The player or music director would choose various pieces from the already existing literature and prepare them for performances.

In 1908, again in France, Camille Saint-Saens was commissioned to write what is believed to be the first film score tailored for a specific film, *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise*. This score was successful, but because of the added expense of commissioning a composer, preparing the music, and hiring the ensemble, the concept of scores specifically composed for a film did not take hold.

However, many people in the industry were becoming aware that there was a need for standardizing music for films, if not specifically composing for them. Music was not yet an integral part of the drama on the screen; it was still simply an adjunct with little or no dramatic significance. And because of the logistical problem of composing for as many different kinds of ensembles as there were theaters, scores were only rarely composed for specific films.

Music Fake Books

What did take hold, however, was a method of standardizing the musical experience of the audience, and a way of codifying what the musicians played. This happened with the publication of several books that provided many different pieces of music with different moods that could cover almost any dramatic situation. These books, of which the most well-known are the *Kinobibliothek* (or *Kinothek*) by Guiseppe Becce, *The Sam Fox Moving Picture Music Volumes* by J.S. Zamecnik, and *Motion Picture Moods*, by Erno Rapée, organized the musical selection to be played by dramatic category. The music director could simply determine the mood or general feeling of a particular scene, look up that idea in the book, and choose one of several possibilities. If, for example, he needed music for a very dramatic scene set in an evil castle, he might have seen these listings under “dramatic expression”:

Night: sinister mood
Night: threatening mood
Magic: apparition
Impending doom
Pursuit, flight
Heroic combat
Disturbed nature: fire, storm

In addition, there were many other moods and also other main categories: Love, Lyrical Expression, Nature, Nation & Society, and Church & State. (See Figs. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3.)

The use of these books could be a cumbersome process, especially if there was more than one musician playing. The music director in each theater would view the film several times with a stopwatch and time each scene. He then would choose the individual pieces to be played, knowing how many seconds each piece should run. Much was dependent on the ability of the conductor or player to anticipate a scene change and to be able to extend or compress a piece. One of the most problematic areas became the transitions between scenes that had different pieces of music. A change in key center, tempo, instru-

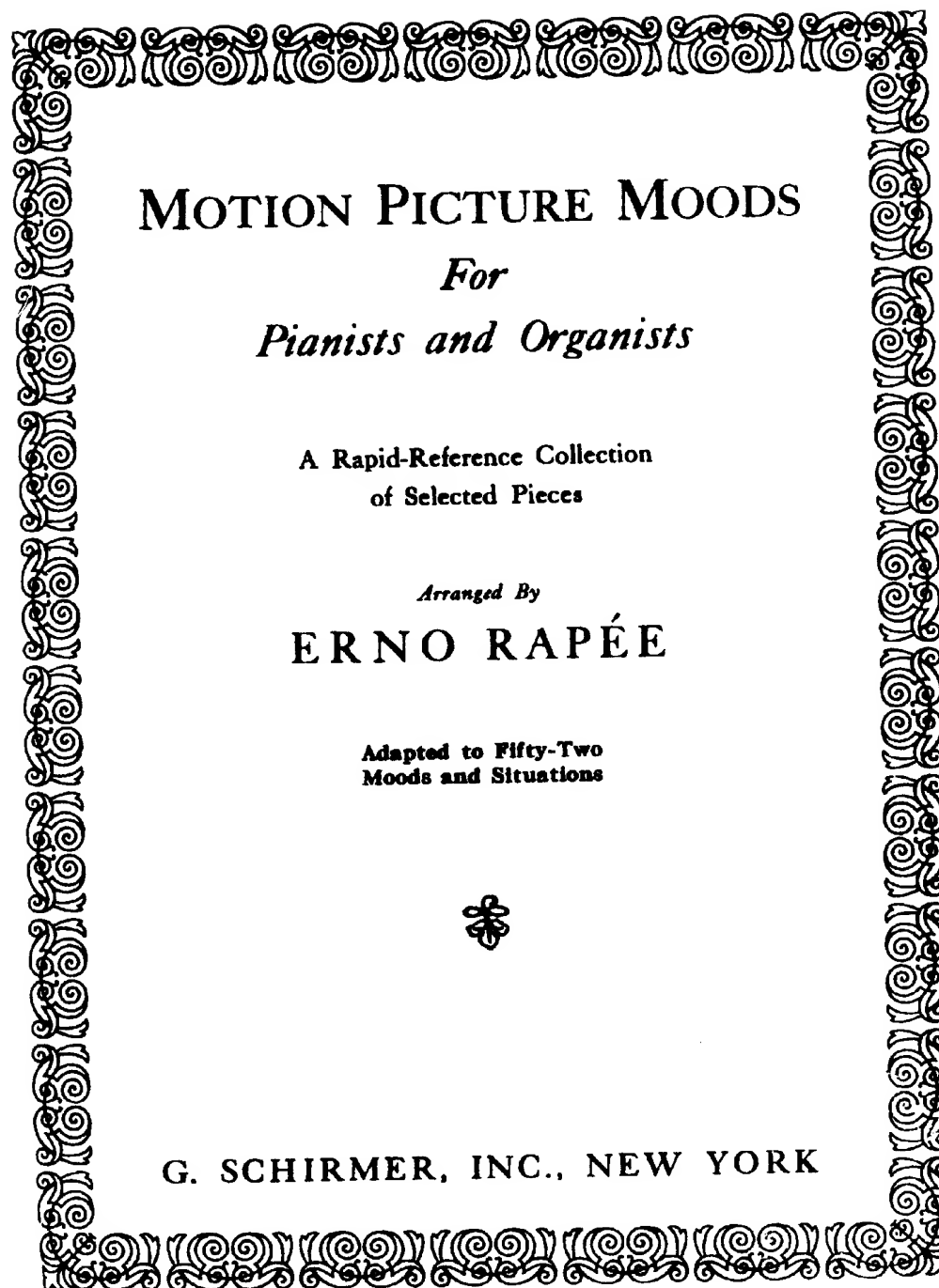


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Agitato No.3

(Suitable for gruesome or infernal scenes,witches, etc.)

Otto Langey



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Fig. 1.3. Rapeé.
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Fig. 1.2. Rapeé.
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mentation, or overall mood could be very awkward without a written-out transition. Therefore, many musical directors created such transitions themselves.

The fake books were successful since they created a set musical script that any musician could follow. However, their dramatic effectiveness was limited by the ability of each theater's musical director.

A concurrent system whose inception actually predates the use of fake books was developed by Max Winkler, a clerk at Carl Fischer Music Store and Publishing Company in New York. Winkler realized that if he could see the films before they were released, he could then make up what he called "cue sheets" for each film (similar to modern-day cue sheets or timing notes, but not to be confused with them). These cue sheets would lay out the choice of music and give timings for how long to play each piece, as well as present guidelines for interpretation, in order to stay synchronized. The publisher would preview the film, create a cue sheet, then organize and sell a book for each film that was provided to the musical director of a theater. This benefited the film maker, for it provided a set musical script with rough timings. It also benefited the publishers of the music, for they could make a profit selling or renting the music itself to the theaters. Here is the cue sheet for an imaginary film that Winkler drew up the night he got the idea:

Music Cue Sheet for
The Magic Valley
Selected and compiled by M. Winkler
Cue

1. Opening—play *Minuet No. 2 in G* by Beethoven for ninety seconds until title on screen "Follow me dear."
2. Play—"Dramatic Andante" by Vely for two minutes and ten seconds. Note: play soft during scene where mother enters. Play Cue No. 2 until scene "hero leaving room."
3. Play—"Love Theme" by Lorenze for one minute and twenty seconds. Note: Play soft and slow during conversations until title on screen "There they go."
4. Play—"Stampede" by Simon for fifty-five seconds. Note: Play fast and decrease or increase speed of gallop in accordance with action on the screen.

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This is clearly imprecise, with the effectiveness of the mood and the accuracy of the timings dependent on the pianist or conductor's ability to interpret these instructions. However, the response from producers and from musicians was overwhelmingly positive. It gave them a musical script to follow that ostensibly followed the wishes of the film makers.

In actuality, both the *Kinothek* and Max Winkler methods were destined for short lives. Winkler's system debuted in 1912 and the *Kinothek* was published in 1919. By the late 1920s the revolution of "talkies," the first movies with their characters actually speaking in synchronized sound, were being distributed. It was this technological advancement that began the modern use of music in movies.